# *The Marsdon Manor Tragedy*

*The active "little gray cells" of that astute detective Hercule Poirot here encounter a difficult problem —and work their way to the unexpected answer.*

## *By* AGATHA CHRISTIE

I HAD been called away from town for a few days, and on my return found Poirot in the act of strapping up his small valise.

"It is well, Hastings. I feared you would not have returned in time to accompany me. The Northern Union Insurance Company ask me to investigate the death of a Mr. Maltravers, who a few weeks ago insured his life with them for the large sum of fifty thousand pounds."

"Yes?" I said.

"There was, of course, the usual suicide-clause in the policy. In the event of his committing suicide within a year, the premiums would be forfeited. Mr. Maltravers was duly examined by the Company's doctor, and passed as being sound. However, the day before yesterday, the body of Mr. Maltravers was found in the grounds of his house in Essex, Marsdon Manor, and the cause of his death is described as some kind of internal hemorrhage. That in itself would be nothing remarkable, but sinister rumors as to Mr. Maltravers' financial position have been in the air of late, and the Northern Union have ascertained beyond any possible doubt that the deceased gentleman stood upon the verge of bankruptcy. Now, that alters matters considerably. Maltravers had a beautiful young wife, and it is suggested that he got together all the ready money he could for the purpose of paying the premiums on a life insurance for his wife's benefit, and then committed suicide.

"Such a thing is not uncommon. In any case, my friend Alfred Wright, who is a director of the Northern Union, has asked me to investigate the facts of the case, but, as I told him, I am not very hopeful of success. Still, we can but make some necessary inquiries. Five minutes to pack your bag, Hastings, and we will be on our way."

ABOUT an hour later, we alighted from a Great Eastern train at the little station of Marsdon Leigh.

"What is our plan of campaign?" I asked as we walked up the main street.

"First I will call upon the doctor. I have ascertained that there is only one doctor in Marsdon Leigh, Doctor Ralph Bernard. Ah, here we are at his house."

We proved to be fortunate in our call; it was Doctor Bernard's consulting hour, but for the moment there were no patients waiting for him. The Doctor was an elderly man, high-shouldered and stooping, with a pleasant manner.

Poirot introduced himself and explained the purpose of our visit, adding that insurance companies were bound to investigate fully in a case of this kind.

"Of course, of course," said Dr. Bernard vaguely. "I suppose as he was such a rich man, his life was insured for a big sum."

"You consider him a rich man, Doctor?"

The Doctor looked rather surprised.

"Was he not? He kept two cars, you know, and Marsdon Manor is a pretty big place to keep up, although I believe he bought it very cheap."

"I understand that he had had considerable losses of late," said Poirot, watching the physician narrowly. The latter however, merely shook his head sadly.

"Is that so? Indeed. It is fortunate for his wife, then, that there is this life insurance. A very beautiful and charming young creature, but terribly unstrung by this sad catastrophe. A mass of nerves, poor thing! I have tried to spare her all I can, but of course the shock was bound to be considerable."

"You had been attending Mr. Maltravers recently?"

"My dear sir, I never attended him."

"What?"

"I understand Mr. Maltravers was a Christian Scientist—or something of that kind."

"But you examined the body?"

"Certainly. I was fetched by one of the under-gardeners."

"And the cause of death was clear?"

"Absolutely. There was blood on the lips, but most of the bleeding must have been internal."

"Was he still lying where he had been found?"

"Yes, the body had not been touched. He was lying at the edge of a small plantation. He had evidently been out shooting rooks—a small rook rifle lay beside him. The hemorrhage must have occurred quite suddenly. Gastric ulcer, probably."

"No question of his having been shot, eh?"

"My dear sir!"

"I demand pardon," said Poirot humbly. "But if my memory is not at fault, in the case of a recent murder, the doctor first gave a verdict of heart-failure—altering it when the local constable pointed out that there was a bullet wound through the head!"

"You will not find any bullet wounds on the body of Mr. Maltravers," said Dr. Bernard dryly. "Now, gentlemen, if there is nothing further—"

We took the hint.

"Good morning, and many thanks to you, Doctor, for so kindly answering our questions. By the way, you saw no need for an autopsy?"

"Certainly not!" The Doctor became almost apoplectic. "The cause of death was clear, and in my profession we see no need to distress unduly the relatives of a dead patient."

Turning, the Doctor slammed the door sharply in our faces.

"And what do you think of Dr. Bernard, Hastings?" inquired Poirot, as we proceeded on our way to the Manor.

"Rather an old ass."

"Exactly. Your judgments of character are always profound, my friend—when there is no question of a beautiful woman!"

I looked at him coldly.

ON our arrival at the manor-house, Poirot handed the parlor-maid his card, and a letter from the insurance company for Mrs. Maltravers. She showed us into a small morning room, and retired to tell her mistress. Ten minutes later a slender figure in widow's weeds appeared.

"M. Poirot?" she faltered.

"Madame!" Poirot sprang gallantly to his feet and hastened toward her. "I cannot tell you how I regret to derange you in this way. But what will you? *Les affaires*—they know no mercy."

Mrs. Maltravers permitted him to lead her to a chair. Her eyes were red with weeping, but the temporary disfigurement could not conceal her extraordinary beauty. She was about twenty-seven, and very fair, with large blue eyes and a pretty pouting mouth.

"It is something about my husband's insurance, is it not? But must I be bothered *now*—so soon?"

"Courage, my dear madame. Courage! You see, your late husband insured his life for rather a large sum, and in such a case, the Company always has to satisfy itself as to a few details. Will you recount to me briefly the sad events of Wednesday?"

"I was changing for tea when my maid came up—one of the gardeners had just run to the house. He had found—"

HER voice trailed away. Poirot pressed her hand sympathetically.

"I comprehend. Enough! You had seen your husband earlier in the afternoon?"

"Not since lunch. I had walked down to the village for some stamps, and I believe he was pottering about the grounds."

"Shooting rooks, eh?"

"Yes, he usually took his little rook rifle with him, and I heard one or two shots in the distance."

"Where is this little rook rifle now?"

"In the hall, I think."

She led the way out of the room and found and handed the little weapon to Poirot, who examined it cursorily.

"Two shots fired, I see," he observed, as he handed it back. "And now, madame, if I might see—"

He paused delicately.

"The servants shall take you—" she murmured, averting her head.

The parlor-maid, summoned, led Poirot upstairs. I remained, conversing desultorily with the lovely and unfortunate woman until Poirot rejoined us.

"I thank you for all your courtesy, madame. I do not think you need be troubled any further with this matter. By the way, do you know anything of your husband's financial position?"

She shook her head.

"Nothing whatever. I am very stupid over business things."

"I see. Then you can give us no clue as to why he suddenly decided to insure his life? He had not done so previously, I understand."

"Well, we had only been married a little over a year. But as to why he insured his life, it was because he had absolutely made up his mind that he would not live long. He had a strong premonition of his own death. I gather that he had had one hemorrhage already, and that he knew that another one would prove fatal. I tried to dispel these gloomy fears of his, but without avail. Alas, he was only too right."

TEARS in her eyes, she bade us a dignified farewell. Poirot made a characteristic gesture as we walked down the drive together.

"*Eh bien*, that is that! Back to London, my friend; there appears to be no mouse in this mouse-hole. And yet—"

"Yet what?"

"A slight discrepancy; that is all! You noticed it? You did not? Still, life is full of discrepancies, and assuredly the man cannot have taken his own life—there is no poison that would fill his mouth with blood. No, no, I must resign myself to the fact that all here is clear and aboveboard— But who is this?"

A tall young man was striding up the drive toward us. He passed us without making any sign, but Poirot seemed interested and spoke to a gardener who worked near by.

"Tell me, I pray you, who is that gentleman? Do you know him?"

"I don't remember his name, sir, though I did hear it. He was staying down here last week for a night. Tuesday, it was."

"Quick, *mon ami*, let us follow him."

We hastened up the drive after the tall young man. A glimpse of a black-robed figure on the terrace at the side of the house, and our quarry swerved and we after him, so that we were witnesses of the meeting.

Mrs. Maltravers staggered slightly, and her hand crept to her side.

"You!" she gasped. "I thought you were on the sea—on your way to East Africa."

"I got some news from my lawyers that detained me," explained the young man. "My old uncle in Scotland died unexpectedly and left me some money. Under the circumstances I thought it better to cancel my passage. Then I saw this bad news in the paper, and I came down to see if there was anything I could do. You'll want some one to look after things for you a bit, perhaps?"

At that moment they became aware of our presence. Poirot stepped forward, and with many apologies explained that he had left his stick in the hall. Rather reluctantly, it seemed to me, Mrs. Maltravers made the necessary introduction.

"M. Poirot, Captain Black."

A FEW minutes' chat ensued, in the course of which Poirot elicited the fact that Captain Black was putting up at the

Anchor Inn. The missing stick not having been discovered (which was not surprising), Poirot apologized, and we withdrew.

We returned to the village, and Poirot made a bee line for the Anchor Inn.

"Here we establish ourselves until our friend the Captain returns," he explained. "You notice that I emphasized the point that we were returning to London by the first train? Possibly you thought I meant it. You observed Mrs. Maltravers' face when she caught sight of this young Black? She was clearly taken aback, and he—*eh bien*, he was very devoted, did you not think so? And he was here on Tuesday night—the day before Mr. Maltravers died. We must investigate the doings of Captain Black, Hastings."

In about half an hour we espied our quarry approaching the Inn. Poirot went out and accosted him and presently brought him up to the room we had engaged.

"I have been telling Captain Black of the mission which brings us here," he explained. "You can understand, M. le Capitaine, that I am anxious to arrive at Mr. Maltravers' state of mind immediately before his death, and that at the same time I do not wish to distress Mrs. Maltravers unduly by asking her painful questions. Now, you were here just before the occurrence, and can give us equally valuable information."

"I'll do anything I can to help you, I'm sure," replied the young soldier, "but I'm afraid I didn't notice anything out of the ordinary. You see, although Maltravers was an old friend of my people, I didn't know him very well myself."

"You came down—when?"

"Tuesday afternoon. I went up to town early Wednesday morning, as my boat sailed from Tilbury about twelve o'clock. But some news I got made me alter my plans, as I dare say you heard me explain to Mrs. Maltravers."

"You were returning to East Africa?"

"Yes. I've been out there ever since the war—a great country."

"Exactly. Now, what was the talk about at dinner on Tuesday night?"

"Oh, I don't know. The usual odd topics. Maltravers asked after my people, and then we discussed the question of German reparations, and then Mrs. Maltravers asked a lot of questions about East Africa, and I told them one or two yarns; that's about all, I think."

POIROT was silent for a moment; then he said gently:

"With your permission, I should like to try a little experiment. You have told us all that your conscious self knows; I want now to question your subconscious self."

"Psycho-analysis, what?" said Black, with visible alarm.

"Oh, no," said Poirot reassuringly. "You see, it is like this: I give you a word; you answer with another, and so on. Any word, the first one you think of."

"All right," said Black uneasily.

"Note down the words, please, Hastings," said Poirot. Then he took from his pocket his big turnip-faced watch and laid it on the table beside him. "We will commence. Day."

There was a moment's pause, and then Black replied: *"Night."* As Poirot proceeded, his answers came quicker.

"Name," said Poirot.
*"Place,"* replied Captain Black.
"Bernard!"
*"Shaw."*
"Tuesday."
*"Dinner."*
"Journey."
*"Ship."*
"Country."
*"Uganda."*
"Story."
*"Lions."*
"Rook rifle."
*"Farm."*
"Shot."
*"Suicide."*
"Elephant."
*"Tusks."*
"Money."
*"Lawyers."*

"Thank you, Captain Black. Perhaps you could spare me a few minutes in about half an hour's time."

"Certainly." The young soldier looked at him curiously and wiped his brow as he got up.

"AND now, Hastings," said Poirot, smiling at me as the door closed behind him, "you see it all, do you not?"*

"I don't know what you mean."

"Does that list of words tell you nothing?"

I was forced to shake my head.

*It is suggested that the reader pause in his perusal of the story at this point, make his own solution of the mystery—and then see how close he comes to that of the author.—*The Editors.*

"I will assist you. To begin with, Black answered well within the normal time-limit, with no pauses; so we can take it that he himself has no guilty knowledge to conceal. 'Day' to 'Night' and 'Place' to 'Name' are normal associations. I began work with 'Bernard,' which might have suggested the local doctor had he come across him at all. Evidently he had not. After our recent conversation, he gave 'Dinner' to my 'Tuesday,' but 'Journey' and 'Country' were answered by 'Ship' and 'Uganda,' showing clearly that it was his journey abroad that was important to him and not the one which brought him down here. 'Story' recalls to him one of the 'Lion' stories he told at dinner.

"I proceed to 'Rook rifle,' and he answers with the totally unexpected word 'Farm.' When I say 'Shot,' he answers at once: 'Suicide.' The association seems clear. A man he knows committed suicide with a rook rifle on a farm somewhere. Remember, too, that his mind is still on the stories he told at dinner, and I think you will agree that I shall not be far from the truth if I recall Captain Black and ask him to repeat the particular suicide story which he told at dinner on Tuesday."

BLACK, when we recalled him, was straightforward enough over the matter.

"Yes, I did tell them that story, now that I come to think of it. Chap shot himself on a farm out there. Did it with a rook rifle through the roof of the mouth; bullet lodged in the brain. Doctors were no end puzzled over it—there was nothing to show except a little blood on the lips. But what—"

"What has it got to do with Mr. Maltravers? You did not know, I see, that he was found with a rook rifle by his side."

"You mean my story suggested to him—oh, but that is awful!"

"Do not distress yourself—it would have been one way or another. Well, I must get on the telephone to London."

Poirot had a lengthy conversation over the wire, and came back thoughtful. He went off by himself in the afternoon, and it was not till seven o'clock that he announced that he could put it off no longer, but must break the news to the young widow. My sympathy had already gone out to her unreservedly. To be left penniless, and with the knowledge that her husband had killed himself to try to assure her future, was a hard burden for any woman to bear. I cherished a secret hope, however, that young Black might prove capable of consoling her after her first grief had passed.

Our interview with the lady was painful. She refused vehemently to believe the facts that Poirot advanced, and when she was at last convinced, broke down.

An examination of the body turned our suspicions into certainty. Poirot was very sorry for the poor lady, but after all, he was employed by the insurance company, and what could he do? He was preparing to leave and said gently to Mrs. Maltravers:

"Madame, you of all people should know that there are no dead!"

"What do you mean?" she faltered.

"Have you never taken part in any spiritualistic séances? You are mediumistic, you know."

"I have been told so. But you do not believe in spiritualism, surely?"

"Madame, I have seen some strange things. You know that they say in the village that this house is haunted?"

She nodded, and at that moment the parlor-maid announced dinner.

"Wont you just stay and have something to eat?"

We accepted gratefully, and I felt that our presence could not but help distract her a little from her own griefs.

SUDDENLY there was a scream outside the door, and the sound of breaking crockery. We jumped up. The parlor-maid appeared, her hand to her heart.

"It was a man—standing in the passage."

Poirot rushed out, returning quickly.

"There is no one there."

"Isn't there, sir?" said the parlor-maid weakly. "Oh, it did give me a start!"

"But why?"

She dropped her voice to a whisper.

"I thought—I thought it was the master—it looked like 'im."

I saw Mrs. Maltravers give a terrified start, and my mind flew to the old superstition that a suicide cannot rest. She thought of it too, I am sure; for a minute later, she caught Poirot's arm with a scream.

"Didn't you hear that? Those three taps on the window? That's how *he* always used to tap when he passed round the house."

"The ivy," I cried. "It was the ivy against the pane."

But a sort of terror was gaining on us

all; and when the meal was over, Mrs. Maltravers besought Poirot not to go at once. We sat in the little morning room. The wind was getting up, and moaning round the house in an eerie fashion. Twice the door of the room came unlatched, and the door slowly opened, and each time she clung to me with a terrified gasp.

"Ah, but this door, it is bewitched!" cried Poirot angrily at last. He got up and shut it once more, then turned the key in the lock. "I shall lock it, so!"

"Don't do that," she gasped. "If it should come open now—"

Even as she spoke, the impossible happened. The locked door swung slowly open. I could not see into the passage from where I sat, but she and Poirot were facing it. She gave one long shriek.

"You saw him—there in the passage?"

He was staring down at her with a puzzled face, then shook his head.

"I *saw* him—my husband—you must have seen him too?"

"Madame—I saw nothing. You are not well—unstrung—"

"I am perfectly well, I— *Oh, God!*"

Suddenly, without any warning, the lights quivered and went out. Out of the darkness came three loud raps. I could hear Mrs. Maltravers moaning.

And then—I saw!

THE man I had seen on the bed upstairs stood there facing us, gleaming with a faint ghostly light. There was blood on his lips, and he held his right hand out pointing. Suddenly a brilliant light seemed to proceed from it. It passed over Poirot and me, and fell on Mrs. Maltravers. I saw her terrified face, and something else!

"My God, Poirot!" I cried. "Look at her hand, her right hand! It's all red!"

Her own eyes fell on it, and she collapsed in a heap on the floor.

"Blood!" she cried hysterically. "Yes, it's blood! I killed him! I did it! He was showing me, and then I put my hand over his and pressed. Save me from him —save me! He's come back!"

Her voice died away in a gurgle.

"Lights," said Poirot briskly.

The lights went on as if by magic.

"That's it!" he continued. "You heard, Hastings? And you, Everett? Oh, by the way, this is Mr. Everett—rather a fine member of the theatrical profession. I phoned to him this afternoon. His make-up is good, isn't it? Quite like the dead man, and with a pocket torch and the necessary phosphorescence, he made the proper impression. I shouldn't touch her right hand if I were you, Hastings. Red paint marks so. When the lights went out, I clasped her hand, you see. By the way, we mustn't miss our train. Inspector Japp is outside the window. A bad night—but he has been able to while away the time by tapping on the window now and then!"

"YOU see," continued Poirot, as we walked briskly through the wind and rain, "there was a little discrepancy. The Doctor seemed to think the deceased was a Christian Scientist, and who could have given him that impression but Mrs. Maltravers? But to us she represented him as being in a grave state of apprehension about his own health. Again, why was she so taken aback by the reappearance of young Black? And lastly, although I know that convention decrees that a woman must make a decent pretense of mourning for her husband, I do not care for such heavily rouged eyelids.

"Well, there it was. There were the two possibilities. Did Black's story suggest an ingenious method of committing suicide to Mr. Maltravers, or did his other listener, the wife, see an equally ingenious method of committing murder? It was a slender chance, and one had to revise all one's ideas of the case. It is now not the husband who seeks to take refuge in oblivion, while leaving his wife provided for, but a shrewd and scheming woman who, knowing her husband's financial debacle, and tired of the elderly mate she has only married for his money, induces him to insure his life for a large sum and then seeks for the means to accomplish her purpose. An accident gives her that—the young soldier's strange story.

"The next afternoon, when M. le Capitaine, as she thinks, is on the high seas, she and her husband are strolling round the grounds. 'What a curious story that was last night!' she observes. 'Could a man shoot himself in such a way? Do show me if it's possible?' The poor fool, he shows her. 'Like that?' she says and then laughs. 'Supposing I pull the trigger?' she says saucily.

"And then—she pulls it!"

**"The Million Dollar Robbery," another exploit of Hercule Poirot, will be described in our next issue.**